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ABSTRACT

The paper considers the nature of support and counseling needed by parents of emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered adolescents. Seven potential areas of conflict for the adolescent are identified and explained with the intention of providing parents with greater understanding of their children's lives. Crises are explained to include conflict areas of status, identity, independence, relationships, sex, values, and decision-making. Suggestions are given for reacting to each crisis area, and the overwhelming importance of communication between parent and child is stressed. Parent training materials are identified, and professionals are urged to treat parents and their children with respect. (CL)

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WORKING WITH PARENTS OF ADOLESCENTS IDENTIFIED AS EMOTIONALLY OR BEHAVIORALLY DISORDERED

Much has been written about the psychology of adolescence. For the most part, these materials have attempted to identify and explain the changes that are experienced and demonstrated by youth as they pass through the "teen" years. Very little has been done to provide parents any assistance in preparing for or coping with the adolescent and his behavior. This may be due in part to many professionals that are either unsure of what to suggest or don't know what to suggest. Others make general statements to the effect that if you give it (the problem) time, it will go away. Many parents of adolescents live their lives waiting for things to change. Time will change many things but it does little to reduce the immediate stress and concern felt by parents when trying to cope with strained relationships or situational crises. One parent stated the problem very well when she told a young psychologist that "until you've lived with one (an adolescent) day after day, you don't know anything." This may well be a correct observation. Personal crises in adolescence are constantly changing. General recommendations as to what to do are usually of little help. Parents must be provided with information and skills that will allow them to interact successfully with their adolescent on both a long term and a short term basis.

Parents should be trained to recognize developmental change, to provide subtle guidance, to maintain open communication, and to support or reinforce the behavioral alternatives they believe to be appropriate and beneficial to the adolescent. Parents and professionals

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may recognize that an adolescent's striving for independence is normal but they may not know how to respond to specific adolescent acts geared toward achieving independence. They may not know how to give the adolescent room to grow up. The extremes of letting go too much or over controlling the situation may create problems for the adolescent, who may respond with behaviors which go beyond the established limits. A consideration that should be remembered is that no matter how deviant an adolescent's behavior might be, it is their attempt to select the best alternative to meet the situation as they see it. Their behavior represents an effort to resolve some conflict or to bring about certain consequences.

To successfully cope with and negotiate this stage called adolescence parents need to be informed about what to expect. It obviously is not enough to simply have been an adolescent. Our memories are very selective regarding our personal experiences. Many times our memories are distorted to make them fit how we wanted them to be rather than how they were in reality. It is important then that parents be aware of normal crisis or stress points that have the potential of becoming major problems to the adolescent as well as to the parents. The adolescent who is suffering from an emotional or behavioral disorder may experience an aggravation of their condition as they are faced with situations which produce these normal crises.

The adolescent, regardless of his emotional stability, is faced with societal expectations which create a difficult situation at best. In our society the adolescent is neither a child nor an adult. The

adolescent is expected to behave as an adult and to leave childish ways behind. But our society has not established any criteria or point of demarcation from which a youth is able to determine that he is no longer a child and has been accepted as an adult. The adolescent is expected to behave and function as an adult but is allowed few, if any, of the privileges that come from being an adult. The uncertainty created by these mixed signals introduces a certain amount of stress in all adolescents. In fact, if we were to use behavior variance as a criteria for emotional or behavioral problems almost every adolescent could be considered disturbed to some extent at various times. Behavior which is unusual or which goes beyond accepted limits has become a hallmark of adolescence. This is not to say that all youth have a difficult time negotiating this stage called adolescence. Some youth seem to have little difficulty while for others it is a time of major problems. If parents know what to expect they may be able to help reduce the stress the adolescent experiences.

There are seven major potential areas of conflict that all adolescents must resolve to at least some degree. Parents, if they understand that these areas of potential conflict, can do much to lessen their impact and the accompanying stress. Each of these areas is a psychological/sociological change that is expected to occur during adolescence. They go beyond but do include the physical changes that each adolescent experiences in the process of growing up. It is not intended to exclude physical change as a potential trouble spot. For many youth these changes can be extremely painful. Parents

can help by preparing the youth for these changes. Through discussion (open communication as a two way process) parents can share information and answer questions and concerns the youth might have. This information should not be left to chance since much misinformation is perpetuated by adolescents sharing with each other.

The areas identified as psychological/sociological change are status, identity, independence, relationships, sex, values and decision-making. Each of these require the adolescent to revise his position toward a more adult oriented standard. It must be remembered that although these areas are presented individually, they may be interwoven with each other. (1) Status. Every adolescent is concerned with his or her status in some group. The questions are..."Where do I fit in the group?" and "What is my role in the group?" Knowing their status in a group helps the adolescent define relationships and develop an estimate of self-worth. Status can range from "excellent student" to "star athlete" to "dependable person" to "class clown" to "class bully." The value of each of these descriptors must be found in the perceptions of the adolescent involved as well as within the particular group. Each descriptor can carry either a positive or a negative value depending upon the perception of the individual or the group. Adults cannot rely upon their own perceptions of how it should be by their standards. It is the groups standards that are important to the adolescent. If the status taken on or accepted by the adolescent is in conflict with adult standards, parents and/or professionals can try to help the adolescent understand that he is

paying too heavily or that the natural consequences may be too negative for whatever gains he might be receiving from that particular status role. Help adolescents choose realistic status goals that are efficient and will pay-off over the long term. (2) Identity. This area relates to a personal sense of identity. "Who am I?" or "How shall I be known?" Glasser (1972) has suggested that we have been experiencing a shift in the relative importance of role versus goal in our society. Previously in our society (prior to 1960) the primary concern for a majority of our population was financial and physical survival. The "Depression" of the 1930's and the Second World War created an atmosphere in which a person needed to be goal oriented to survive. That is, the individual was willing to work toward goals that would provide an accepted level of security. Once these goals had been reached and the security obtained, the individual could then focus their energy on a particular role. Today, because of a certain amount of economic affluence brought about by mass social programs developed over the last 30 years, youth have developed an attitude of "first I want to find out who I am (role) and then I'll work for some goal." This reversal of the old order of "goal then role" to "role then goal" has placed parents in the position of not understanding their children. In reality, it is not that the parents don't understand their children but rather that the parent views the situation from a "goal" orientation while the adolescent views the same situation from a "role" orientation. In order to interact successfully with the adolescent, the parent must accept the adolescent

as a worthwhile person and do so in ways that demonstrate an honest concern and support. Parents can provide opportunities for the adolescent to develop reasoning and decision-making skills, to allow for the selection of alternatives, to develop responsibility, and to gain and demonstrate achievement. An adolescent's identity should help him know who he is, what he represents, what he believes in, and to be able to differentiate self from others. (3) Independence. This area usually creates a considerable amount of stress for most parents. It includes all of the adolescent's attempts at becoming self-sufficient. It is during this process that rules are challenged, that the adolescent responds to parents as if they didn't know what they were talking about, and the adolescent wants to decide things that effect him directly. The rebellion aspect of this process can be dealt with by parents and with less trauma if the parents recognize that it is going to occur and that they allow for a gradual shift from dependence to independence before major conflicts develop. Also, the parent must remember that they are the adult authority and that final responsibility lies with them. Adolescents don't want the removal of all restrictions; they simply need to test them and to seek the revision of some at appropriate times. Parents who are too strict or who provide too much freedom establish the necessary conditions for conflict to develop. Respond to the adolescent as a considerate, intelligent, and caring person rather than responding emotionally. Responding emotionally sets up a confrontation between "my feelings" and "your feelings." In other words, it becomes a

personal struggle to protect self rather than resolving issues. Parents should not wait until their child becomes an adolescent to work on independence. The child should have been provided the opportunity to develop these skills at an earlier age and allowed to exercise them within appropriate reason at various ages. Self-sufficiency is necessary to function successfully in our society. (4) Relationships. The type and quality of relationships change dramatically as we grow from childhood to adulthood. It is during adolescence that adult relationships come into focus. The expectations of one's role in a relationship is the major shift. Problems sometimes arise when the adolescent attempts to take on an adult role in a relationship and the involved adults are not ready to allow that to happen. Other problems occur when an adolescent tries on an adult role but doesn't know exactly what to do. Parents can be a big help by helping the adolescent learn the appropriate skills and thus increase the likelihood that the adolescent will be successful in his attempts at behaving in a more adult manner. (5) Sex. Adolescents become very aware of their maleness and femaleness. Physical changes serve as a constant reminder of what they are or are becoming. Sexuality is an extension of one's identity. Situations that interfere with the establishment of one's sexuality can be a source of great psychological stress. A good, solid foundation of information about anatomy, sexual functioning, and the psychological changes that will occur should help most adolescents work through this area successfully. Adolescents need accurate information about such topics as masturbation, petting,

sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and venereal disease. This information should be provided in the home. However, some parents may not have accurate information or may not be comfortable in sharing it with their child. Schools then, may have some responsibility in providing this information. Parents need to be aware that the attitudes children learn from the home will, in all probability, be the ones they will keep throughout their lifetime. (6) Values. Each generation is accused of rejecting the values of the previous generation. Standards for behavior are challenged as a part of establishing identity and independence. Adolescents are looking for something to believe in, to invest of themselves in, and to defend. One way to do this is to reject old values and to look for new ones. The painful part of this process for parents is that it is usually the values of the parents that are rejected by the adolescent. Such things as religion, family traditions, and social customs are typically prime targets. If parents maintain their position on these issues they demonstrate to the adolescent the strength of their beliefs and convictions. This is not to say that these issues are not up for discussion. Parents should be willing to discuss (not lecture) these issues with their child. One comforting thought for parents is that a majority of adolescents who have rejected parental values during adolescence return to them when they become adults. (7) Decision-making. Our society places a high value on one's ability to recognize and select alternatives. Decision-making and problem solving are skills that need to be taught to children. This teaching should begin at an

early age so that by the time the child reaches adolescence, he has the tools to make appropriate decisions. Allowing a child the opportunity to make decisions and to problem solve not only allows them to exercise those skills but helps to develop their self-confidence. Confidence in one's ability to make wise decisions reduces their fear of failure and increases the likelihood that they will be successful.

The most effective technique a parent can possess that will be helpful is assisting the adolescent to successfully manage these areas of potential crisis is communication. Communication is a two way process, that is, you convey ideas by speaking and you hear ideas by listening. It is effective only when you do both well. Wagonseller and McDowell (1982) in their program "Teaching Involved Parenting" have identified a number of factors essential to effective communication. Such factors as the appropriate use of descriptive praise, constructive criticism, non-verbal messages, listening skills, and a caring attitude in listening are vital to a successful relationship between parent and adolescent.

Professionals working with parents have access to a variety of commercially available materials which are excellent foundations for their groups. Programs such as "Teaching Involved Parenting" by Wagonseller and McDowell (Research Press, Champaign, Ill., 1982); "Systematic Training for Effective Parenting" by Dinkmeyer and McKay (American Guidance Service, Inc., Circle Pines, Minn., 1976); "Managing Behavior: A Program for Parent Involvement" by McDowell

(Research Press, Champaign, Ill., 1978); "The Art of Parenting" by Wagonseller, Burnett, Salzberg and Burnett (Research Press, Champaign, Ill., 1977); and "You and Your Child" by Wagonseller and McDowell (Research Press, Champaign, Ill., 1979) are most helpful in designing, organizing and conducting parent training programs.

When working with parents professionals should remember:

1. Parents have little, if any, training in being a parent.
2. Parents may lack the knowledge or experience to effectively deal with certain situations.
3. All of us have our weaknesses.
4. Help parents correctly identify their assets.
5. Everyone has their down days.
6. All parents experience times of futility and dejection.
7. All parents experience instances of frustration.
8. Crisis occurs in all families.
9. Positive efforts toward effective change can be made when good communication has been established.
10. Situations do occur which interfere with our working together.
11. Use an appropriate format to present information.
12. Everyone needs the right incentive to get started.
13. Each individual family member has their own needs.
14. Be a good helper - provide support.
15. Things do change.

Professionals should help parents to respect the individual worth of the child. They need to become actively involved with their child in a supportive way. This helps the child to know that someone does care and is willing to help. Parents must learn to become consistent in their relationship and interactions with their child. The adolescent needs to know that they can rely on their parents and that they can find support and security there. Teach the child to recognize and wisely select alternatives. The child learns to trust you and what you say when you follow through on commitments you make to the child. To the adolescent this element of trust is of

extreme importance. Actions do speak louder than words but words are important too, especially when they are consistent with actions.

Professionals can be of great assistance to parents if they will quit treating them and their children as damaged goods. Treat them with respect. Learn to listen (verbally and non-verbally) and hear what is being said. You are needed for information, for training, and more importantly, for support. Become involved, it pays off for the parent, for the adolescent, and for yourself.

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